

Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) — Manitoba Region's Environmental Education Program

by Cathy Shaluk

What prairie bird are you? A sleek Northern Harrier? A dancing Sharp-tailed Grouse? Or perhaps a soaring Sandhill Crane? Spread your wings wide and we will find out! With the Prairie Wing String stretched in front of you from one fingertip to the other, your wingspan will match up with that of a wingspan of a prairie bird! It could be any number of birds including the tiny Ruby-throated hummingbird with a wingspan of 12 cm to one of the largest, the White Pelican at 280 cm!

Or discover what the Sleeping Sheep, Red Buffalo and Brown Bison all have in common — they all at one time helped to shape and maintain the health of the Tall Grass Prairie!

Or visually see the incredible lengths some prairie grasses will go to in order to reach life-sustaining water — such as Big Blue Stem with a root system that will stretch across the classroom to a length of four metres!

The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) is excited and proud to offer its first ever in-class education programs on the Tall Grass Prairie Ecosystem. These curriculum-based programs are offered to students from Kindergarten through to Grade 12. This experience gives many students who may never have the opportunity to visit a real live prairie to feel, hear, see and appreciate the uniqueness of one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America.

With the support of generous and dedicated donors, the Manitoba Region of NCC was able to create, launch and deliver the curriculum-based "Prairie Studies Education Program" to students in Manitoba classrooms. There are now over 11,000 students who have measured their wingspans, stretched a Big Bluestem grass from tip to root across the span of the classroom, and patted a Black Bear's fur!

Our programming is free, fun, interactive, curriculum-based . . . and growing! The in-class program consists of a vibrant presentation showing the Tall Grass Prairie in full colour photography, a hands-on activity component, a question-and-answer period, and suggested multi-disciplinary follow-up activities. The presentations are structured to the level of the students. Topics range from an introduction to prairie plants and animals and their special adaptations needed to survive, to relationships within and around their habitats. Students learn about settlement and geologic history of the region, sustainable development, and the management tools used in prairie restoration and maintenance.

The Manitoba Region of NCC's presence in the classroom has gained acceptance and recognition from the Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth, school division administrators, principals and classroom educators. As the education community becomes more involved with us, the Manitoba Region of NCC has been invited to present and provide resources to the provincial and national Envirothon Science Competitions for Senior Years Students. As the Education Coordinator of the Manitoba Region of NCC, I am now a member of the Science Teachers Association of Manitoba Education.

Due to NCC's involvement and success in the environmental education field, the Manitoba Region of NCC was invited to participate in the Monarch Teacher Network (MTN) Canada Program. With the goal of promoting the Monarch Butterfly program to classroom teachers in Manitoba, NCC, the Manitoba Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth, and MTN volunteers hosted an exciting and successful training workshop for Manitoba teachers in 2006.

The goal of the Manitoba Region of NCC is to raise the awareness of our young people, to challenge them to become effective stewards of the land, and to help them realize that they can influence the future and health of what remains of our natural legacy for the benefit of all Canadians.

Call the Manitoba office today (204) 942-6156, and give a student the opportunity to feel, hear, see and appreciate the uniqueness of one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America: the Tall Grass Prairie.

Background Information on NCC and History of the Tall Grass Prairie

The NCC, a national non-profit organization, has a broad mission to preserve ecologically significant areas and educational interest in Canada. Currently, NCC is the largest private steward of lands conserving species at risk in Canada, having secured and protected over 1,200 properties for a total of two million acres from coast to coast since 1962.

The Manitoba Region of NCC has concentrated most of its attention on the southern ecosystems and on the streams and river valleys that traverse them. Manitoba's native tall, mixed, and fescue grass prairies and aspen parklands have been the prime focus of NCC as these ecosystems have been reduced to tiny remnants of their former expanse.

To date, less than half of 1% of what was once nearly 1.5 million acres of Tall Grass Prairie remain. Through settlement, most of the original prairie, which extended from the Interlake region of Manitoba down to Texas, had been lost. In the late 1980s, significant remnants of Tall Grass Prairie were discovered in southeastern Manitoba; since then over 20,000 acres of this endangered prairie have been protected.

Since 1989, through the creative and cooperative efforts of the Critical Wildlife Habitat Program Partners, the Manitoba Region of NCC has taken the lead role in the management of the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in southeastern Manitoba. To date, through these partnerships, over 90 properties in Manitoba have been secured, with a cumulative total area exceeding 25,000 acres. NCC is able to secure and protect properties through land donation and purchases, donated or purchased conservation easements, and cash donations.

Cathy Shaluk joined the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) team four years ago as Education Coordinator for the Manitoba Region. Bringing over 15 years of experience working in the environmental education field, Cathy brought NCC's new "Prairie Studies" Education Program on the Tall Grass Prairie to life!

